UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/AC.96/785
11 December 1991

ENGLISH
Original: ENGLISH AND FRENCH

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

Forty-second session

UNHCR'S CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO EMERGENCIES*

1. The development and ongoing review by UNHCR of its emergency-preparedness and response capabilities are essential for an efficient discharge of its mandate. Member States have been regularly informed, especially through the appropriate sections of the Overview document (contained for the forty-second session in A/AC.96/775) of developments in this area. In 1989, the Executive Committee was alerted to a number of proposals being formulated in relation to early warning, staffing for emergencies and an emergency stockpile (A/AC.96/729, para. 84). The Report of the Board of Auditors presented to the same session of the Executive Committee also recommended the creation of an emergency stockpile (A/AC.96/730, paras. 80-83). It will also be recalled that the Executive Committee in 1990 recognized the need for the High Commissioner to have a higher degree of flexibility to ensure funding of ongoing needs under approved General Programmes and of initial emergency needs under Special Programmes, pending the receipt of contributions pledged (A/AC.96/760, para. 29B). This flexibility was subsequently assured by a range of measures, including changes made by the Executive Committee to the Financial Rules governing the Emergency Fund (A/AC.96/768, para. 11).

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* This document was presented to the forty-second session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme under the symbol EC/SC.2/1991/CRP.14.

2. At the June 1991 Informal Meeting of the Executive Committee, the High Commissioner indicated that she would present proposals on emergency preparedness and response to the forty-second session of the Executive Committee.

3. This Conference Room Paper sets out a range of initiatives aimed at assuring UNHCR's emergency-preparedness and response capability. These initiatives are distinct from, yet not unrelated to, broader measures being discussed to assure an adequate UN system-wide response to complex and protracted emergency situations. In such situations, a coherent and rapid response by the UN system must be based on an effective assignment of responsibilities among the organizations and agencies of the system; but it also presupposes that each organization and agency concerned has the capacity to contribute to such a response. The measures presented in this Paper, which are aimed at further strengthening UNHCR's capacity to respond to refugee situations, will also assure the quality of UNHCR's contribution to any broader UN system-wide response.

4. This Conference Room Paper, presented for the information of the Executive Committee, has focused on the mobilization of funds, personnel and relief items, three critical areas where gaps and shortcomings in UNHCR's capacity to respond to emergencies have been identified.

I. FUNDING

5. The availability of funds is a necessary (but not always sufficient) pre-condition to assure an effective response to man-made emergency situations. As mentioned above, the Executive Committee addressed the need of the High Commissioner to have a greater degree of flexibility to respond immediately to a range of emergency situations. The mechanism designed to facilitate immediate interventions in new refugee situations is the Emergency Fund. Among the measures approved by the Executive Committee in February 1991 was an increase in the level of the Emergency Fund from $ 10 million to $ 20 million, along with the authority to allocate within this new ceiling up to $ 6 million from the Fund for any one emergency.

6. Further changes were also made to the Financial Rules relating to the Working Capital and Guarantee Fund (WCGF). Among these changes were provisions to use the WCGF to fund temporary gaps during the year in the Annual Programme and the Emergency Fund, pending receipt of contributions and also to cover unforeseen, limited end-of-year shortfalls in the Annual Programme and the Emergency Fund.

7. Another measure that will enhance the timely and effective utilization of UNHCR's financial resources is the proposal to restore the Programme Reserve to the previous level of 10 per cent of the approved General Programmes budget.

II. STAFFING

8. A system for improving and accelerating the staffing of emergency situations must be one of the fundamental emergency-preparedness activities of UNHCR. The deployment of qualified, experienced and trained staff has been

one of UNHCR's most difficult challenges in recent major refugee emergencies. Whatever level of success has been achieved in meeting this challenge has not been without cost. UNHCR can only go so far in drawing on personnel from other duty stations to respond to emergencies. Even when such personnel are replaced, which is rarely the case, it creates an unavoidable disruption in other programmes which, over time, proves extremely harmful. There needs to be a balance between ongoing and emergency requirements. To maintain this balance, and to be able to respond to emergencies in such a way that the right people are fielded at the right time, UNHCR requires a flexible mechanism.

9. The envisaged comprehensive emergency staffing system has a number of elements, chief of which is the concept of Emergency Response Teams.

Emergency Response Teams

10. UNHCR's recent experiences in the Persian Gulf emergency have underscored the importance of teams of staff, with a wide variety of expertise, to respond to emergencies. To this end, it is proposed to designate five Emergency Response Teams, each normally comprising five staff experienced in a variety of functions, including programming, protection, and administration. Each team would be led by an Emergency Preparedness and Response (EPR) Officer (see below).

11. The staff who would make up the Emergency Response Teams, while remaining in their normal posts, would nevertheless be on stand-by at all times to proceed to an emergency situation. The designation of responsibilities of the Teams, especially a regional focus, will be done in a flexible manner in accord with changing needs. The current obvious focus would be on the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf regions. The Team members would meet from time to time with the Team Leader to review preparedness plans and potential emergency situations, as well as to attend Emergency Management Training refresher courses. The regional focus of the Teams should serve to expedite deployment and response, but the Teams could also be sent to other regions in cases of other large-scale emergencies.

Emergency Preparedness and Response Officers

12. To head these Emergency Response Teams, UNHCR proposes to provide for five professional posts in the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section. In addition, these officers would be given specific functional responsibilities in the Section as well as designated regional responsibilities. These posts would be designated "Emergency Preparedness and Response Officers".

13. The EPR Officers would be responsible for all aspects of emergency preparedness and response in their regions. Most importantly, the EPR Officers will embody UNHCR's response capacity by being the person, in case of an emergency, immediately despatched to the field as the Team Leader of the Emergency Response Team. He/she would be responsible for putting into place the structure and systems required to ensure the smooth running of the relief operation. In cases of large-scale emergencies in other regions, EPR Officers could be readily redeployed.

14. In non-emergency periods, the EPR Officers would be responsible to ensure that a number of essential preparedness measures are met. These measures would include, inter alia, assisting Field Offices and Regional Bureaux in the development of appropriate early-warning systems and emergency contingency plans, arranging emergency-management training courses, and identifying availability of resources and buffer-stocks in emergency-prone areas. The EPR Officers would also provide proposals to management on the fine-tuning and further development of preparedness and response measures, using the lessons learned from specific emergency operations.

15. The EPR Officers will not supplant the responsibility of Field Offices or Regional Bureaux to undertake emergency preparedness and response activities. Rather, the EPR Officer will be available to provide the expertise to ensure that preparedness activities are undertaken and will provide the stand-by capacity to ensure the required emergency response.

Emergency Roster

16. As a critical back-up to the Emergency Response Teams, an Emergency Roster will be established. The roster will be comprised of approximately 80 UNHCR staff members, both in the Professional and senior General Service categories, trained in the Emergency Management Training Programme. A wide range of expertise will be available among roster members. Such members will be called forward by the Emergency Response Team as they are needed, in some cases to replace Team members after the initial phase of the emergency and, in other cases, to augment the response by serving as field officers.

Technical Specialist Roster

17. In all emergency situations, technical expertise is required immediately. Normally this includes the sectors of logistics, nutrition, health, water, sanitation, site planning and social services. Most of this expertise is available in the Programme and Technical Support Section (PTSS). In the event of an emergency, however, it is necessary to have available more than one expert within a sector as well as experts who are able to remain with the programme for several months.

18. To enable the speedy identification of technical specialists, UNHCR maintains a computerized roster of over 500 experts, many of whom already have extensive experience with UNHCR. This roster will be reviewed so as to make it easier to identify experts according to their speciality, nationality, language ability and regional experience. In addition, another possible source of technical expertise could be from the ranks of the UN Volunteers. Since, however, it has long been recognized that it is often more effective to hire experts who are nationals of the host country rather than bring in only expatriate personnel, a roster of locally-available specialists is also being established.

External Personnel

19. In certain types of refugee emergencies, UNHCR requires not only quick but also a visible presence to ensure that fundamental principles of assistance and protection are maintained. Sometimes a need exists for a level of staffing that UNHCR cannot meet. A recent example of this was the emergency situation in Turkey, Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran. UNHCR entered into arrangements with certain non-governmental organizations for the secondment of staff on a short-term basis. The seconded individuals were able to be mobilized quickly, and were willing to work as part of the UNHCR team.

20. UNHCR is in the process of establishing a structured mechanism for the call-up of short-term, seconded staff in large-scale emergencies. UNHCR will enter into agreements with a small number of agencies and organizations which will maintain their own emergency rosters. Certain procedures will need to be developed to cover stand-by arrangements and the mobilization of such staff. They should be sent only after the Emergency Response Teams are in place. In addition, UNHCR will provide such personnel with basic briefing before deployment to the field. There will also be a need to establish clear statements of authority and reporting relationships for seconded staff. Finally, there will be evaluations of such external emergency staff by UNHCR emergency managers for use by both the agency and UNHCR in future emergencies.

III. EMERGENCY RELIEF SUPPLIES

21. Recent developments have underlined, more than ever, the need for UNHCR to enhance its capacity speedily to provide life-saving material assistance in emergency situations. This was also recognized by the UN Board of Auditors, who in 1989 recommended, inter-alia, that UNHCR should identify emergency and special needs, develop specifications and design, conduct market searches for competitive sources and stock items in reasonable quantities, where appropriate.

22. UNHCR commissioned a consultancy on emergency stockpiling in June 1989. The resulting feasibility study thoroughly examined various options: UNHCR could establish its own warehousing facility, either managing and providing all necessary associated services itself, or contracting with a commercial firm for both warehouse space and all services; UNHCR could negotiate extended procurement contracts with suppliers, who would guarantee to make available a certain quantity of goods at short notice; or UNHCR could, through a special cooperation agreement, utilize the services of another organization or agency which had an existing, proven capacity for warehousing and despatch.

23. The study then recommended using the established warehousing and despatch services of another organization or agency. However, financial constraints prevented UNHCR from pursuing the recommendations at that time. In the meantime, the proposal to establish a stockpile has been further refined on the basis of recent emergencies.

24. UNHCR's intention is not simply to stockpile and hold in warehouses relief items, but rather to make the most efficient use of its resources, with better controls allowing a quicker and more effective emergency response. It

should be understood that what is under discussion is an emergency stockpile and not a substitute for various buffer-stock arrangements for ongoing programmes.

25. Parallel to the need for a stockpile of emergency relief items is the requirement for adequate logistical arrangements in order to ensure relief arrives in a timely manner. While proper contingency planning should help to lessen the need for costly air shipments, in certain cases where the arrival rate of new refugees is very high, airlifts may be the only means of ensuring survival. Recent emergencies have demonstrated the value of having aircraft at UNHCR's disposal for a limited period. To this end, standby logistical arrangements with Governments will be further pursued.

Emergency Stockpile Requirements

26. Many items are urgently required in an emergency situation. UNHCR emergency stockpile requirements are foreseen to cover tents, tarpaulins, plastic sheeting, blankets, kitchen sets, water equipment, sanitation equipment, communications equipment and Rubb Hall warehouses. Items recommended for stockpiling are those which require considerable lead time from the placement of a purchase order to arrival in-country. Other items (such as emergency health kits, soap, cold-chain equipment, etc.) are usually available from the suppliers within one or two weeks. Items with shelf-lives of less than one year will not be stockpiled, thereby excluding vaccines and certain other medicines. These, in any case, are usually available quickly.

27. In regard to the quantities to be provided in stockpiles, these are generally based on a population of 50,000. While there are valid arguments to stockpile for more than 50,000, UNHCR would wish initially to take a phased approach and test the system before making further commitments.

Stockpile Focus and Location

28. UNHCR is continuing discussions with Governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations on an agreement that would enable UNHCR to use their services, on a priority basis, for the stockpiling and despatch of emergency materials. The essential elements of the arrangement would be:

- Procurement of items required for the UNHCR stockpile will be undertaken by UNHCR.

- The agency will be responsible for warehouse and stock management; upon request from UNHCR, the agency will give priority to the issuance, export packing and shipment of materials belonging to the UNHCR stockpile.

- When stocks are drawn, UNHCR will initiate replenishment action.

29. All supplies will be stored at the agency's warehouse with the following exceptions:

- Family tents and tarpaulins, which are bulky commodities, will remain stored, at nominal costs, in the region where the current primary suppliers are located. Contingency plans will be drawn up to ensure the rapid despatch of these items.

- Communications equipment and other administrative supplies will be kept at UNHCR Headquarters as these will ordinarily be an essential part of the deployment of the Emergency Response Team.

- Certain other items will be left with suppliers where satisfactory and cost-effective arrangements are offered.

IV. BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

30. It is estimated that the cost of establishing an emergency stockpile will amount to $ 3.1 million. Supplies used from the stockpile will be charged to specific emergency operations, with the result that replenishment should, therefore, become an automatic process. The only recurring costs would be those related to emergency staffing which are anticipated to be in the order of some $ 900,000. These costs will subsequently be attributed as Support Costs to the emergency situations as they arise. The High Commissioner intends to meet the initial budgetary requirements from the Emergency Fund and by having resource to donors for special contributions.